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## Embracing diversity: the way forward

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# Embracing diversity: the way forward

## Spiritans gather in Niagara Falls

“We need to come together,” said our Provincial Leader Fr. Bob Colburn, relaying what a Spiritan had told him prior to our Chapter 2009.

“Chapter” is one of those religious community in-words that cause outsiders to roll their eyes and ask, “What?” Chapters belong in books or are well-known bookstores (at least in Canada). Browsers go through Chapters a book at a time. Readers go through books a chapter at a time.

Spiritans, on the other hand, go through Chapters six years at a time. This general assembly deals with questions like: Where are we now? What’s been going on in the past six years? What will the next six years mean? What directions do we see ourselves taking?

Chapter 2009 brought together, to the Carmelite Renewal Centre in Niagara Falls, thirty one professed Spiritans and eight Lay Spiritans from Australia, Canada, Ghana, Ireland, Malawi, Nigeria, Poland, Portugal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Trinidad and the USA. Expectations were great; a new heart,

a new spirit. “All are welcome in this place. Let no one walk alone. The journey makes us one.”

Fr. Bob challenged us: be signs of hope, walk together, enjoy differences, dare to be sent to often forgotten people, live uncertainty with joy, embrace diversity, be willing to move forward.

### Embracing diversity: the way forward

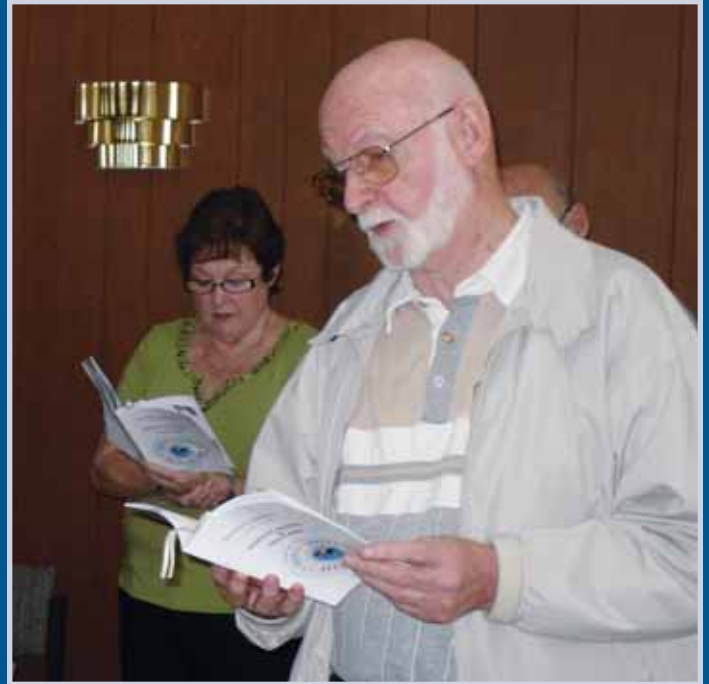
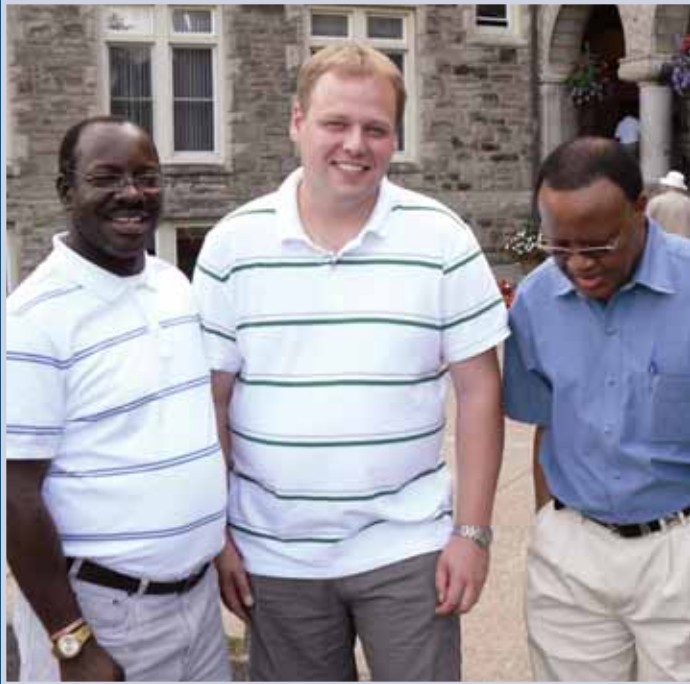
Our Moderator, Lay Spiritan Gary Warner, directed our attention to the motto chosen for this gathering, *Embracing Diversity: The Way Forward*.

“We come with our differences and our similarities. Each of us has multiple identities. It’s when we get stuck in a single identity that we get into difficulty. Our diversity is a source of innovation and creativity. So, let’s include everyone, let’s embrace that diversity and give it a hug or two.

“The Way Forward invites us to use our right brain — the one that sees possibilities, opportunities and potential.







This brain guides us towards the abundance of resources waiting to be tapped into. This brain that generates energy — how appropriate in Niagara Falls.”

Our opening Evening Prayer recalled the words of Ken Newell, Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, Belfast: “I have only once in my life visited Niagara Falls... It was such a powerful metaphor of the Holy Spirit poured out on the church on the day of Pentecost. Even more importantly, the Holy Spirit is still being poured out upon us and into us ... this spiritual waterfall renews our lives and puts a new heart into us at every stage of our life journey.”

### Look back, look around, look ahead

Since our last Chapter in 2003 we have added to our Spiritan internationality. From Edmonton and Toronto our recently arrived Spiritans bring to us wisdom and energy from their homes overseas and the various countries in which they had served on their way here.

Since that same Chapter we have said a final goodbye to Fathers John Sheehy (2004), Michael Brosnan and Peter Fleming (2006), Garry McCarthy and Robert Hudson (2009).

So we looked back to gather the wisdom of our collective past, we looked around at where we now find ourselves and we looked forward to whatever new challenges and celebrations await us. We pooled our memories, our current strengths and our future hopes.

We voted on some key resolutions: Green card — Yes, Red card — No, Yellow card — Abstention.

### Praying alone, praying together

Fr. Barney Kelly reminded us that the Holy Spirit is energy for our particular mission and way of praying; that Father Libermann saw prayer as clearing a path of entry for the Lord, a getting out of the way to let the Lord act on us. He highlighted *lectio divina* as a contemporary approach to a prayerful reading of the Bible: start with a passage, rediscover it in our own life experience, and then go back to that same passage as a “home-coming” in which we see ourselves. The passage — be it story, poem, teaching — becomes ours. Such prayer lets God in.

There followed a long discussion on retreats and community prayer. How do we really pray together? During the week we did more than talk about prayer — we prayed together morning and evening, we celebrated Eucharist daily, we sang our hymns and refrains, and we had a midweek reconciliation liturgy focused on Spiritan Lucien Deiss’ song, *Grant to us, O Lord, a heart renewed*.

### What needs mending?

Part of living together involves being able to look each other in the eye and say, “I’m sorry.” We reflected on how mending was an ordinary everyday activity to be attended to. Mending

is more than just putting a patch on things. We mend our brokenness in order to become who we are meant to be for the sake of each other. Then, perhaps, we can set about mending the world.

As Joy Warner brought forward a bowl of water we stretched out our hands in blessing over it. She placed it on the table and we approached it two by two. Dipping our fingers in it we then traced the sign of the cross on our partner’s forehead as a sign of peace, reconciliation and friendship.

### Matters financial

Chapters are a time to focus on finances. Provincial Bursar Fr. Paul McAuley took us through an amazingly detailed PowerPoint presentation of our current financial situation. Seeing it graphically had far greater impact than reading it in printed form. We have sold Neil McNeil High School and Laval House to the Toronto Catholic District School Board. One result of that is that we must now set about buying a new Retirement Community residence and new Provincial Offices.

To no one’s surprise we learned that we had not escaped the current downturn in the money markets of the world. So our ability to contribute as much as we have done to Spiritan missions, the training of seminarians and special projects is more limited.

On a more personal level we asked ourselves how we live our vow of Poverty, how we adhere to our personal budgets, and how we might economize as the rest of the world has to do.

### Out of energy, out of time

By Thursday we were ready to look forward and draw up some mission priorities and plans for the future. What works will we continue, disengage from and undertake to keep the spirit of the Chapter alive? If we are what we do, what should we be doing? Having made some inroads into these topics, we realized that time, like money, had run out on us. Our group energy was somewhat depleted and the decision was taken to delegate to the Provincial Council the task of drawing up a list of Mission Priorities to be submitted to the membership for consideration and feedback.

A final item of the proposed agenda was also handed over to the Council: Planning for future leadership and replacement of those who retire from their current appointments. Enmeshed in this was the question of our continuation in education. If so, how? If not, what a pity!

Our final gathering was in the wonderful Carmelite church where we celebrated Mass together. It renewed our focus on being missionaries to the place, culture and world to which we are sent and in which we find ourselves. As we sang the Spiritan Missionary Hymn to close this Chapter our voices were hopeful and harmonious: “Bear witness unto me on earth in every clime, And I with you shall be until the end of time.” ■